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# Penelope's *Agnoia*: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the *Odyssey*

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## Penelope's *Agnoia*: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the *Odyssey*

Sheila Murnaghan

The *Odyssey* occupies a special place in the history of Greek representations of the female for its portrait of a heroine who is equal in importance and in heroic character to her husband, the male hero on whom the poem avowedly centres and whose triumph it primarily celebrates.<sup>1</sup> Penelope is seen to resemble Odysseus closely, sharing his distinctive traits of williness and endurance.<sup>2</sup> Those two traits combine in the action for which she is traditionally best known, her trick of weaving and unweaving a shroud for Laertes; in that action, she uses craft to hold out against the suitors and so to continue her determined waiting for that

I would like to thank the special editor of this issue [of *Helios*], Marilyn Skinner, and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. [*Agnoia* is Greek for 'ignorance,' 'lack of knowledge'.]

<sup>1</sup> Notably, Penelope is one of the few female characters in Greek literature who escape the confining classification of women as either objects of erotic desire or respected wives and mothers, but not both, through which the Greek male imagination attempted to contain the power of the opposite sex. For a recent account of this dichotomy in classical Athenian social ideology and social practice, see Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 204–28.

<sup>2</sup> William G. Thalmann points out that Odysseus and Penelope are linked through diction expressing the endurance of suffering: *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 212, n. 25. The similarity in character between Odysseus and Penelope is explored by Marilyn B. Arthur, 'Early Greece: The Origins of the Western Attitude Toward Women', in John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan, eds., *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), pp. 15–16, and Helene P. Foley, '“Reverse Similes” and Sex Roles in the *Odyssey*', *ibid.* pp. 59–78 [repr. this volume], and reflected in the title of a recent article: Patricia Marquardt, 'Penelope “Polytropos”', *AJP* 106 (1985) 32–48.

which she most desires, the return of her husband Odysseus. Penelope plays a decisive role in the *Odyssey's* plot, keeping Odysseus' enemies at bay until he can come home to defeat them, and, most crucially, putting the means of their defeat into his hands by setting the contest of the bow.

Penelope is ascribed a heroism comparable to Odysseus' at two significant points in the *Odyssey's* text. One is the reverse simile that marks her reunion with Odysseus in which her experiences at home are treated as comparable to his trials at sea (*Od.* 23.233–47). The other is Agamemnon's final comment in Book 24 when he certifies that Odysseus' story has turned out differently from his own by congratulating him on his faithful wife (*Od.* 24.191–202). At that point Penelope's achievement is seen to be so central that it threatens to outshine even Odysseus'. Or, as John Finley puts it, 'that comes near making our *Odysseia* a *Penelopeia*.'<sup>3</sup> In this poem which is self-consciously shaped by two important and related shifts of focus, from a heroism based on physical strength (*biē*) to a heroism based on powers of the mind (*mētis*) and from the adventurous setting of the battlefield and the high seas to the domestic setting of peacetime communities, there is scope for a female character to display a heroism comparable to that associated with men.

And yet the role of this centrally heroic figure in the *Odyssey's* plot is in many ways contradictory and obscure. Its proper appreciation is hampered by recalcitrant problems of interpretation, problems that centre on Penelope's most significant action, the setting of the contest of the bow. Although readers of the poem have always admired Penelope and acknowledged her centrality, they have had to struggle to give a coherent account of her motives and behaviour during the decisive stretch of narrative from Odysseus' return to his house in disguise in Book 17 to his self-revelation and defeat of the suitors in Books 21 and 22. Characteristically, many critics have met this difficulty by explaining it as the result of the poem's compositional history, seeing the problems in our text as signs of the inept amalgamation of several different versions. Instead I would suggest that the literary or interpretive difficulties surrounding the presentation of Penelope represent the poem's indirect

<sup>3</sup> John H. Finley, Jr, *Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 3.



testimony to problems inherent in the social world it portrays, problems involving issues of power and gender.

Penelope's motives during the second half of the poem are difficult to assess because the poet is generally uncommunicative about her thoughts, as he is not about Odysseus', leaving us to deduce her state of mind from outward gestures and speeches. Because Penelope has been shown to be capable of duplicity, in particular through her trick with the shroud, it is not clear whether those speeches are to be taken at face value. Furthermore, she is responding to the presence of an apparent stranger who is actually the returned Odysseus in disguise, so that what seems to be a meeting of strangers is actually the reunion of husband and wife. This raises the question of whether Penelope fully understands the situation in which she is acting, a question that has taken the specific form of a continuing debate about whether she recognizes Odysseus before he willingly identifies himself to her.<sup>4</sup> Interpreting Penelope's role in the plot involves deciding the extent to which she is aware of her own circumstances and thus the extent to which she understands and controls the consequences of her own actions.

The question of whether Penelope understands and controls the consequences of her actions bears in an important way on the question of her resemblance to Odysseus, for such a state of understanding and control is at once the sign and the reward of the quality of *mētis*, 'cunning intelligence',<sup>5</sup> that is Odysseus' distinctive heroic trait. *Mētis* allows a person both to see and exploit the shifting, changeable character of external realities. The possessor of *mētis* is able to say one thing while thinking another and to overcome his enemies through deceit. Odysseus' *mētis* gives him a fuller understanding of the circumstances in which he and the other characters of the poem are operating and a greater power to shape the course of events. His possession of this mastery is dramatized in his encounter with Athena in Book 13 where, as the action enters a new phase leading directly to his triumphant recovery of his home, he joins forces with his divine patron and

<sup>4</sup> This debate dates to antiquity. See Seneca, *Epistles* 88.8.

<sup>5</sup> 'Cunning intelligence' is the translation adopted in the title of the English translation of the book that provides the best general introduction to the nature of *mētis* both in the *Odyssey* and elsewhere in Greek literature: Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978).

constructs with her a plot that shapes the action of the rest of the poem.

The essential feature of this plot is Odysseus' disguise, the withholding of his own identity, a stratagem that actively represents his superior capacity to understand the true nature of events. Odysseus' disguise is the key to his strategic advantage over his enemies, the suitors, for it allows him to conceal his presence until the moment when he is in a position to defeat them. But even before that moment arrives, his superior knowledge of their shared situation becomes a manifestation of the moral and physical superiority that will be revealed when he finally strings the bow. The narrative is pervaded by a form of irony at the suitors' expense, based on the gap between Odysseus' authoritative possession of the truth and their fatal obliviousness. This irony becomes most pointed when the suitors unwittingly speak in ways that acknowledge Odysseus' presence or act in ways that promote their own defeat and so are drawn into his plot without realizing it.<sup>6</sup>

Odysseus' disguise puts him in a similar position of superiority in relation to Penelope. While her ignorance of the stranger's identity does not express itself in morally culpable acts like those of the suitors, it is nonetheless in sharp contrast with Odysseus' full understanding of the situation in which he is acting. As long as Odysseus conceals his identity from her, her actions are governed by a false sense of uncertainty about whether he is even still alive, and she cooperates in bringing about the revelation of his return while believing that his return is increasingly less likely.

If we read the text of the *Odyssey* straightforwardly—as I argue that we should—taking Penelope's own words and the lack of any direct hint from the narrator that she recognizes Odysseus at face value, we are obliged to conclude that she does not fully understand the nature of her circumstances and the consequences of her own actions. Her crucial action of setting the contest of the bow is for her a painful and reluctant gesture marking the moment when she has to admit defeat and give up her long-maintained wait for Odysseus. The fact that Odysseus is before her and her action becomes the means by which he secures and discloses

<sup>6</sup> For example, 18.351–5, where Eurymachus suggests that Odysseus' appearance is somehow the work of the gods. He believes he is speaking sarcastically, making fun of the stranger for his baldness, when in fact he is unwittingly speaking the truth, acknowledging a heroic return that resembles in form and import a divine epiphany.

his return is a fortunate coincidence; Penelope plays this decisive role in bringing about the fulfilment of her own desires despite, rather than because of, her own intentions. Like the suitors, she is drawn into Odysseus' plot without realizing it, and, like them, she is set apart from him by the ironic disparity between his understanding of their shared situation and her own. Penelope is tricked by Odysseus as he is tricked only by a goddess. Thus what is at stake in the question of whether Penelope recognizes Odysseus is the degree to which she resembles him and is his match in *mētis*.

Because Penelope's ignorance of Odysseus' identity during the narrative of his return is at odds with suggestions elsewhere in the poem that she is as clever and resourceful as Odysseus himself, it is important to look closely at what the text tells us about how she comes to be in that position. Penelope's ignorance is no accident, but the result of deliberate planning on the part of Odysseus and Athena. Odysseus' deception of Penelope is not a by-product of his plot against the suitors but a major element in his strategy: the main reason given in the text for his disguise is his need to conceal himself not from the suitors but from Penelope (*Od.* 13.190–3). This is so even though he is aware, as we are, that Penelope remains loyal to him. He has been told so by his mother in the underworld (*Od.* 11.181–3) and learns it now again from Athena (*Od.* 13.190–3). Concealing his return from Penelope makes Odysseus' strategy against the suitors harder rather than easier to effect; it means that he cannot enlist her aid as he enlists the aid of Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius. Furthermore, it causes her unnecessary pain as it prolongs the grief and uncertainty with which she is afflicted because of Odysseus' absence. While Odysseus brings his son Telemachus into his plot at once, making him his partner in deceiving the suitors, he purposefully—and, it is often said, cruelly—excludes his most crucial ally, his wife.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of Odysseus' illogical but deliberate exclusion of Penelope from awareness of the plot in which they both participate emerges in the course of his dialogue with Athena in Book 13, in which the terms of the subsequent action are negotiated and defined. When Odysseus meets Athena disguised as a shepherd and instinctively tries

<sup>7</sup> For a recent statement of this problem with references to earlier discussions, see Chris Emlyn-Jones, 'The Reunion of Penelope and Odysseus', *G&R* 31 (1984) 1–2 [repr. this volume].

to hide his identity from her, she translates this display of wiliness into a program for his return: she announces that the caution Odysseus has shown will be applied particularly to Penelope, even though she acknowledges that Penelope is loyal to him (*Od.* 13.333–8):

Any other man coming happily home from such wanderings  
would be eager to see his children and his wife in his house.  
But it doesn't suit you to expose yourself by asking questions  
until you test your wife even more, but she, as always,  
stays in the house, and always bitter nights  
and bitter days waste away for her as she weeps.

As Athena praises Odysseus for the wariness that distinguishes him from other heroes, she evokes the two ways in which a Homeric hero's wife can represent a threat to his success. First, his desire for her can distract him from the task with which he is faced, luring him into a premature enjoyment that costs him the achievement of his true goal; and, second, she can herself betray him.<sup>8</sup> Of these threats, the capacity of women to distract heroes from their task is emphasized in the *Iliad* with its focus on battlefield achievement, especially in the account of Hector's visit to the city in *Iliad* 6, and in the parts of the *Odyssey* dealing with Odysseus' struggle to reach home.<sup>9</sup> The second half of the *Odyssey*, with its focus on Odysseus' reception into the home he has now reached, emphasizes the danger that arises from the possible treachery of wives. Athena's words make it clear that the poem is concerned with this possibility even if its hero's own wife is entirely loyal, for she congratulates Odysseus for adopting a course of action that is in principle correct, although in this instance unnecessary. Wives are in general not to be trusted, and most men are too incautious to remember this. Odysseus' procedure of disguising himself from Penelope should therefore be understood as an expression of the general treacherousness of wives that does not reflect on the character of Penelope, whose fidelity is not in doubt.

<sup>8</sup> These two dangers are neatly linked in the story Menelaus tells about how Helen (a figure who epitomizes both female seductiveness and female treachery) tried to subvert the Achaean strategy of the Trojan Horse by calling out to the various heroes who were hidden inside in the voices of their wives (*Od.* 4.264–89): her feigned behaviour is distracting while her actual behavior is treacherous.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Johannes Th. Kakridis, *Homer Revisited* (Lund: Publications of the New Society of Letters at Lund 64, 1971), pp. 68–75.

Odysseus' concealment of his return from Penelope, however illogical, dramatizes the way in which the hero's success is threatened by his need to depend on his wife. Odysseus' marriage is the least stable of the relationships through which he recovers his former position. Because his identity as Penelope's husband does not derive from an unalterable tie of blood but from a socially-instituted relationship, it is the one in which he can readily be replaced. It is as Penelope's suitors that his competitors are able to challenge his position; they can legitimately aspire to the position of her husband as they cannot to that of Odysseus' son and heir. Odysseus must rely for his success on Penelope's continued willingness to consider him her husband and thus on the continuity of such inherently volatile qualities as desire, affection, and loyalty. Throughout the *Odyssey*, the threat to heroic achievement posed by the hero's need to rely on the loyalty of his wife is highlighted through the negative example of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

But, even though Penelope's loyalty is essential to Odysseus' success, there is a danger that it may not be sufficient. Her determination to view Odysseus as her unique husband creates a serious vacuum at the centre of power in Ithaca and so obstructs the orderly continuity of society over time, which is only possible if certain stable roles can be assumed successively by different individuals. Thus Penelope is subject to powerful social pressures, represented in a sinister form by the suitors, who would like to usurp Odysseus' place by marrying her, but also more legitimately by Telemachus, who would like to succeed to it lawfully and cannot if she remains Odysseus' waiting wife. Thus the permanence of marriage is vulnerable, not only to the antisocial potential of irregulable sexual desire, as represented by Clytemnestra, but to considerations stemming from the proper functioning of the social order, as represented here by the entire male community of Ithaca.

Because of her subjection to these social pressures to remarry whatever her own desires may be, Penelope's character becomes in a sense irrelevant to the role she plays in the plot. She is inevitably a threat to her husband's security and becomes, despite her fidelity, the object of a general mistrust of women, which is specifically manifested in Odysseus' concealment of his return from her. The *Odyssey's* unusually sympathetic portrait of an exemplary wife is placed in a wider context of suspicion towards women from which even she cannot altogether escape. Through its presentation of Penelope as an exception to a general rule, the poem

self-consciously depicts the formation and authorization of a tradition of misogyny even as it places a counterexample at the centre of its story.

This process can be observed in the way in which the Agamemnon story is invoked as justification for Odysseus' concealment of his return from Penelope. The *Odyssey's* sense of its own story as extraordinary is expressed throughout in its use of the Agamemnon story, not just as a foil to the story of Odysseus, but as a norm from which the story of Odysseus departs. Even as the poem opens, Zeus is drawing general conclusions about human behaviour from the Agamemnon story, and other characters are seen to do so throughout the poem. Agamemnon himself is given the opportunity to make a final comment on the story of Odysseus in the underworld speech referred to above (*Od.* 24.191–202). The consequences of this bias for the reputation of women are made explicit in that speech as Agamemnon predicts that Penelope's virtue will win undying *kleos* for her while Clytemnestra's treachery 'gives an evil reputation / to all women, even to one who does what is right' (*Od.* 24.201–2).<sup>10</sup> Agamemnon here looks ahead to the formation of a tradition of misogyny that, as he acknowledges, is based on paying attention to some examples and not to others.

The *Odyssey* in its depiction of Odysseus concealing his return from Penelope makes it clear that he is treating Penelope as if she were like Clytemnestra even though he knows that she is not and suggests that this is an appropriate course of action.<sup>11</sup> Although Odysseus is not depicted as internalizing the information he receives during his visit to the underworld, he is in effect following the advice given him there by Agamemnon. Agamemnon advises him to apply the lesson of his, Agamemnon's, experience to his own situation. He tells him not to be gentle and open with his wife but to conceal his true thoughts from her, although, like Athena in Book 13, but even more explicitly,

<sup>10</sup> For a later protest against that tradition, see a surviving fragment of Euripides' *Melanippe the Captive*, in which the speaker, presumably Melanippe herself, complains that men blame all women if one is found to be evil. Denys Page, ed., *Select Papyri* III (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), 13.20–1.

<sup>11</sup> Penelope is identified with Clytemnestra in the mythological tradition outside the *Odyssey* in two ways: Penelope's father Icarius is the brother of Clytemnestra's father Tyndareus, and in a number of later stories Penelope does not remain faithful to Odysseus. See W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1897–1902), III.2.1908–11.

he goes on to say that in Odysseus' case this caution is unnecessary: 'And yet you, Odysseus, will never be murdered by your wife...' (*Od.* 11.444).<sup>12</sup>

Despite her repeatedly-stressed difference of character, Penelope is considered to be as dangerous as Clytemnestra because the nature of her position as Odysseus' wife means that, whether she wants to or not, she eventually attracts his enemies to his house. Even if she is entirely loyal to Odysseus, she is nonetheless associated with them and must therefore be treated with caution. Odysseus' gesture of disguising himself from Penelope shows how the artificial nature of marriage makes women systematically unreliable to their husbands so that any woman, no matter what her character, can be regarded as treacherous.<sup>13</sup>

The way in which Odysseus' action is influenced by the perspective of Agamemnon marks it as part of a generalized suspicion of women with which male characters whose sense of self-worth depends on control of their circumstances respond to their dependence on women, a dependence that is intensified in the heroic world where success requires long absences from home. Penelope can then be seen as a victim of the tendency of men to counter their vulnerability to women by depriving them of power. The particular situation that results from this serves by its awkwardness to show how counterproductive such a strategy can be: because she is so important to Odysseus' return, Penelope is deprived of the information that would allow her to cooperate knowingly in making it possible.

Odysseus' problematic and contradictory action of disguising himself from Penelope generates a problematic and contradictory stretch of narrative that does not permit a simple or unified interpretation.

<sup>12</sup> This interchange between Odysseus and Agamemnon itself illustrates the formation of a generally misogynistic outlook on the basis of the misfortunes of the Atreidae: Agamemnon concludes his own story, which stresses Clytemnestra's treachery, with a statement, like the one he makes in 24, that Clytemnestra's actions will bring shame on all women (*Od.* 11.432-4); Odysseus comments that Zeus has in general cursed the Atreidae with female treachery and refers to the way this curse has spread to the many others who died because of Helen (*Od.* 11.436-9); and Agamemnon then makes this the basis for his warning to Odysseus not to trust his wife (*Od.* 11.441-3).

<sup>13</sup> The way in which typical plot patterns, of which the returning hero's disguising himself from his wife is certainly one, may override the depiction of character is borne out by Vladimir Propp's observation that the characters' motivations are the most variable and fluid elements in folktales. *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. L. Scott, rev. 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. 68.

Approaching their shared experience from perspectives shaped by disparate degrees of knowledge, Odysseus and Penelope perceive those experiences in ways that have proved difficult to reconcile; through those divergent perceptions the poem testifies simultaneously to two distinct visions of human experience. Odysseus interprets even Penelope's own behaviour as part of the plot which he and Athena control, while she, being left out of that plot, sees it quite differently. In the difficult episode in Book 18 in which Athena inspires her to appear to the suitors and encourage them despite her distaste for them,<sup>14</sup> Odysseus rejoices in the realization that she is acting counter to her own desires because he can foresee the outcome that will turn her solicitation of gifts from the suitors into a trick at their expense (*Od.* 18.283). But for Penelope this dichotomy between what she wants most and the way she feels impelled to behave does not represent a pleasing trick which she controls, but a confusing conflict of impulses (*Od.* 18.164–7). Similarly, Odysseus confidently interprets Penelope's dream of the geese as a prefiguration of the plot of his return that is shortly to be enacted, while she, lacking certain knowledge that he is still alive, remains doubtful (*Od.* 19.535–69). In both cases, Odysseus is in a position to focus exclusively on her desire for his return and to contemplate its eventual fulfilment, while she has to take into account what to her is the increasing probability that she will have to come to terms with the suitors. Her responsiveness to that probability is registered in her behaviour and thoughts in ways that Odysseus simply ignores, in her new desire to appear before the suitors, even if that desire is implanted in her by Athena, and in her feelings of sadness in her dream at the loss of the geese.<sup>15</sup>

Like her appearance before the suitors in Book 18, Penelope's setting of the contest of the bow involves a dichotomy between the meaning her action has for her as she takes it, which she expresses explicitly and poignantly to the stranger as she announces the contest to him

<sup>14</sup> For references to the main discussions of this scene, see Thomas Van Nortwick, 'Penelope and Nausicaa', *TAPA* 109 (1979) 267 n. 1.

<sup>15</sup> These signs of positive interest in the suitors need not be seen, as they often are, as incompatible with a preference for Odysseus' return. For the view that Penelope's dream expresses attachment to the suitors, see George Devereux, 'The Character of Penelope', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 26 (1957), 378–86; A.V. Rankin, 'Penelope's Dreams in Books 19 and 20 of the *Odyssey*', *Helikon* 2 (1962) 617–22; Joseph Russo, 'Interview and Aftermath: Dream, Fantasy, and Intuition in *Odyssey* 19 and 20', *AJP* 103 (1982) 4–18.



(*Od.* 19.560–81), and the meaning it acquires through its actual consequences. Setting the contest also involves a similar departure from her previous strategy, represented by the trick with the shroud, of deliberately tricking the suitors. The contest, like her Book 18 appearance, has the same duplicitous structure as the trick with the shroud: all three are actions that seem to hasten Penelope's marriage to the suitors, but in fact prevent it. But the two later actions differ significantly from the earlier one in that Penelope is no longer aware or in control of her own duplicity. The exposure of the trick with the shroud signals that there is a limit to the length of time for which she can control her own situation by fooling the suitors. The doubleness that persists in Penelope's behaviour is imposed on it by that further element in her situation of which she is kept ignorant, the presence of Odysseus. As she experiences it, her action testifies, not to the wily mastery of circumstances that is Odysseus' hallmark, but to an inevitable subjection to the social pressures created by her situation—pressures which are only one specific manifestation of a wider form of human subjection, subjection to the passage of time. The most decisive action in the plot is not brought about by *mētis*, but by a painful acceptance of powerlessness. It is, then, an action that testifies against what is elsewhere in the poem affirmed, especially through the characterization of Odysseus.

Odysseus' triumph over his enemies through the exercise of *mētis* represents a triumph over the waning of his power that comes with the passage of time. When he deliberately disguises himself in response to the suitors' challenge, he is able to embrace old age and social powerlessness as a false screen to be manipulated rather than yielding to them as inescapable debilities. His unfailing *mētis* thus makes him impervious to fluctuations of circumstance.<sup>16</sup> But Penelope's story suggests that even the qualities that are central to Odysseus' success, cleverness and strength of will, are vulnerable to the changes of fortune that come over time. That she is forced to act in a way that is seemingly out of character by coming to terms with the suitors challenges the notion that the traits that make Odysseus heroic—traits that Penelope shares with him but seems to lose at the most crucial stage of the action—can be viewed as stable characteristics that transcend and protect against

<sup>16</sup> On the power of *mētis* to overcome the instability of time, see Detienne and Vernant (above, note 5), pp. 20, 40.

variations in social status and power. Penelope, because she is by virtue of her gender placed in a position of powerlessness, a condition that is endorsed even by Odysseus in the ways discussed above, is able to express, both directly in her speeches to the stranger and indirectly through her actions, the vulnerability that Odysseus is protected by his disguise and the notions it represents from ever having to acknowledge. Given the poem's aristocratic belief that heroism is not produced by chance circumstances but is essential and inborn, the vision Penelope embodies is an acutely threatening one and its inclusion in the poem is a measure of the *Odyssey's* openness to challenges to its essentially optimistic and wish-fulfilling story.

The extent to which the evident import of Penelope's action in setting the contest of the bow is threatening can be measured in the wide range of negative responses it has provoked. This tradition of negative response begins within the poem itself. When, during his reunion with Penelope, Odysseus perpetuates the fiction of his absence through the false wedding feast, the reaction of passers-by is to condemn Penelope (*Od.* 23.149–51):

Surely someone has married the much-wooed queen.  
Hard-hearted, she could not endure to keep the great house  
of her own husband, unceasingly until he should come back.

Penelope's remarriage (which even Odysseus could plausibly be said to endorse, as Penelope's words at 18.256–73 reveal)<sup>17</sup> is here treated as a reprehensible betrayal of Odysseus. Once again the text points to the misogynistic tendency of general human opinion, the inclination to blame women for the circumstances by which they are constrained.<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis on Penelope's lack of endurance in this reproach suggests the way in which the sexual betrayal of which Penelope is accused is linked to a wider and more abstract form of betrayal: her gesture betrays the poem's dominant claim, discussed above, that certain human characters are consistently endowed with the power—in the form of certain characteristics, cleverness and an enduring will—to win out

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also the way in which he anticipates her remarriage in his question to Anticleia at *Od.* 11.179.

<sup>18</sup> Penelope herself seems aware that her reputation is threatened by her untenable situation when she tells both Eurymachus (*Od.* 18.254–5) and the stranger (*Od.* 19.127–8) that her reputation (*kleos*) would be greater if Odysseus should return.

against circumstances. And while this formulation translates Penelope's 'betrayal' into less overtly moral terms, it has aroused no less vehement censure.

Like the suitor Amphimedon, who after his death constructs from his experience of Odysseus' story a conspiracy theory according to which Penelope was explicitly instructed by Odysseus to set the contest (*Od.* 24.167-9), critics have felt that the events of the story only make sense if Penelope is aware of what she is doing, if those who benefit from the turn of events have also shaped them. They find in the text as it stands a breach of literary propriety that offends them as much as Penelope's supposed breach of faith offends her Ithacan observers. In particular, they find Penelope's surrender (or even, as it is sometimes called, her collapse) unmotivated and inconsonant with her characterization as intelligent. In a variety of ways these critics have tried to explain the text away by claiming that something different is going on, that Penelope really (in one of a number of senses) recognizes Odysseus before she sets the contest. In other words, they have attempted to restore to her the control over her actions of which Odysseus deprives her when he disguises himself from her.

One version of this type of explanation is the Analyst argument that the *Odyssey's* text reflects the imperfect adaptation of an earlier version of the story in which, as in Amphimedon's telling, Odysseus does reveal himself to Penelope before the contest.<sup>19</sup> In this view, Penelope's action really belongs to a context in which she does understand what she is doing, from which it has been ineptly transplanted. Another version is the view advanced by Philip Harsh that Penelope does recognize Odysseus even though he does not deliberately reveal himself, but keeps her recognition a secret.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For a recent summary of this position, see G.S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 245-7. Other exponents of this view include: U. von Wilamowitz, *Die Heimkehr des Odysseus* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1927), p. 87; Edouard Schwartz, *Die Odyssee* (Munich: Huebner, 1924), p. 110; W. J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 80-91; and Denys Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 119-29.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Harsh, 'Penelope and Odysseus in *Odyssey* XIX', *AJP* 71 (1950) 1-21. Harsh is followed by Douglas Stewart, *The Disguised Guest: Rank, Role, and Identity in the Odyssey* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1976), pp. 103 ff. Harsh's argument shows well how such readings represent a kind of protest against what stands in the text. He defends the reading-between-the-lines that his interpretation requires by suggesting

The most compelling and currently influential version of such an interpretation is the view put forward by Anne Amory that Penelope recognizes Odysseus subconsciously.<sup>21</sup> This approach has yielded a series of sensitive and sympathetic interpretations of Penelope's behaviour that succeed in bringing together those elements in the text that seem incompatible: Penelope's evident sense of uncertainty and confusion and the text's many indications, in the form of signs to which Penelope might be expected to respond, that its action conforms to a carefully-orchestrated plot. By locating control over events in Penelope's subconscious, this interpretation integrates both versions of her experience into her character, drawing on a theory of human behaviour according to which all people are more in control of their destinies than they realize and are in a sense kept unaware of the plots of their own lives.

But what is lost in this satisfying, but also anachronistic, interpretation is the poem's awareness of Penelope as a victim first of her social situation, in which the role she chooses for herself—faithful wife of a man who is absent—is an impossible one, and further of her husband's defensive response to that situation, which serves to reinforce and perpetuate it. Precisely because they present as external the influences on human action that psychologizing readings such as Amory's reinterpret as internal,<sup>22</sup> the Homeric epics are particularly sensitive to the problems generated by social definitions of character. Thus their plots centre on the crises that occur when characters whose sense of self is rooted in their social position are challenged by changes in their outward status, changes that open up disorienting rifts between the self as inwardly perceived and as outwardly identified, between unchanging character and shifting social roles. The plot of the *Iliad* is generated by one such crisis when both Achilles and Agamemnon are threatened with the loss

that a more straightforward reading implies either that Penelope is not an impressive character or that Homer is not a good poet: 'Either Penelope is stupid or by this time [midway through Book 19] she suspects this man's identity (unless, of course, the poet is manipulating his characters as puppets).'

<sup>21</sup> Anne Amory, 'The Reunion of Odysseus and Penelope', in Charles H. Taylor, Jr, ed., *Essays on the Odyssey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 100–21. Amory's interpretation is shared by many critics including Norman Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's Odyssey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 235 ff.; Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 303–4; Russo (above, note 15).

<sup>22</sup> See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 2–12.

of a mark of outward status and each refuses to accept it. In the *Odyssey* both Odysseus and Penelope face similar threats in the form of the suitors' challenge to the identity each possesses through being married to the other; Odysseus is able to master that challenge through the adoption of a disguise, but Penelope, who lacks the autonomy allowed to those male heroes, finally has no recourse but painful acquiescence to a gesture that contradicts her character.

The theory that Penelope recognizes Odysseus subconsciously fails to do justice to the way in which Penelope is victimized by circumstances beyond her control, circumstances in which the integrity of her character is compromised. In bringing together the text's opposed versions of Penelope's experience into a unified interpretation of her character, that reading internalizes her blindness at the same time that it internalizes at the subconscious level a degree of control she seems otherwise to lack. Amory's interpretation makes Penelope's role in the plot intelligible and endows her with a complexity of character such as is prized in modern fiction at the cost of distinguishing the way her mind works from the clear-sighted mastery attributed to Odysseus: 'In contrast to the way Odysseus reasons about his experiences and reaches out to become master of his circumstances, Penelope is passive and intuitive. She looks at things only intermittently; she is always holding a veil in front of her face, or looking away from things.'<sup>23</sup>

It is certainly possible to argue that Amory's characterization of Penelope is in no way derogatory, in accord with that strain in contemporary feminist thinking that celebrates a distinctly female mode of consciousness marked by intuition and indirectness. But it must be recognized that that characterization does diminish Penelope in terms of the most overt values of the *Odyssey*, for it denies her the kind of intelligence that is expressed in the exercise of *mētis*. Furthermore, once the veil that has been put before Penelope's face—by Odysseus and Athena, not by herself—is removed, Penelope is no longer the passive, uncertain figure that Amory evokes. She articulates a clarity of vision that significantly qualifies the optimism of the story's outcome, drawing our attention to the irreparable loss of time that she and Odysseus have suffered (*Od.* 23.210–12) and insisting on hearing the prophecy of Teiresias,

<sup>23</sup> Anne Amory, 'The Gates of Horn and Ivory', *YCS* 20 (1966) 55. Cf. also Taylor (above, note 21), p. ix and Russo (above, note 15), pp. 10–11, for similar comments that also identify Penelope's mode of thought and action as distinctively feminine.

which counters the notion that Odysseus has returned for good (*Od.* 23.256–87). And, with the trick of the bed, in which she exercises the real power she has over Odysseus' fate, Penelope regains control over the complex significance of her own words and gestures.

The difficult but crucial stretch of narrative that centres on Penelope's encounters with her disguised husband offers us a difficult but crucial interpretive choice. We can accept one of a variety of readings that satisfy two natural desires: the desire for a narrative that can be interpreted coherently (whether as an amalgam of several distinguishable variants or as a portrait of concealed or subconscious recognition) and the desire for a heroine who in one way or another controls her fate. Or we can read the text more literally, responding to a heroine who really is what she seems to be, an intelligent and resourceful woman who, for all that she knows, has been defeated nonetheless by the incompatibility between her fidelity to her husband and her social position. That literal reading requires us to accept the presence of irreconcilable viewpoints at some points in the narrative and to relinquish our expectations that the characters with whom we identify can perfectly control their destinies; it requires us to acknowledge the element of chance that turns the contest of the bow into the occasion of Odysseus' triumph. But it also offers certain gains. It restores to Penelope the equal share of *mētis* with Odysseus that is by nature hers and relocates the difference between them in the social distinctions between their roles, and it restores to the text a degree of honesty about its own central myth of an invincible heroism based on *mētis*. Penelope's painful steps towards a happy consummation that is to her entirely fortuitous and miraculous reminds us, however ironically, that *mētis*, the ability to think one thing and say another, is not always proof against the constraints of the social world in which characters must not only think but also act.